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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 002326

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH CATHOLIC CHURCH LEADERS

REF: CARACAS 2206

CLASSIFIED BY ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION JOHN CREAMER 1.5  
(D)

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Summary:

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¶1. (C) In a July 29 meeting with retired Cardinal Castillo Lara and Catholic Bishops Conference President Archbishop Porras, the Ambassador recognized the growing tension between the Catholic Church and the GOV, and offered United States support for any statements or actions taken by the Church in defense of human rights, democracy or social justice. The United States is also prepared to provide financial aid to Church social programs, especially in poor areas. Porras and Castillo welcomed the possibility of United States funding for Catholic social programs, and reiterated the Catholic Church's commitment to defending democracy and human rights. Castillo criticized Chavez' dictatorial rule and said the Church will continue to denounce his undemocratic actions. Porras said he will be in Washington September 7-8 and would be open to meeting with U.S. officials. End Summary

¶2. (C) Ambassador Brownfield met July 29 with retired Catholic Cardinal Castillo Lara, Catholic Bishops Conference President Archbishop Baltasar Porras and Father Raul Biord. Castillo has sharply criticized President Chavez over the last month, calling him a 'paranoid dictator.' Chavez responded by denouncing Castillo as "a bandit, coupster, devil and a hypocrite". The Catholic Bishops Conference issued a statement July 29 rejecting GOV attacks on the Cardinal and calling on the GOV to respect political freedom.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador noted the sharp GOV reaction to Cardinal Castillo's recent comments criticizing President Chavez and the GOV. The United States recognizes the difficult situation facing the Catholic Church and is prepared to support any actions or statements by the Church on issues such as democracy, human rights and social justice. The United States is also willing to provide financial assistance to Catholic social programs and projects in poor areas if the Church desires. The Ambassador clarified, however, that the United States would not try to politicize the Church's activities nor would it press the Church to adopt specific policy positions.

¶4. (C) Cardinal Castillo thanked the Ambassador for his support, noting that Venezuela faces a critical moment in its history. Chavez is concentrating all power in his hands and is using oil money to cement his political control. The political opposition is disorganized after the international community's acceptance of Chavez' victory in the 2004 referendum—a victory achieved through fraud. Still, Castillo said the Catholic Church in Venezuela has always been clear in its defense of democracy and human rights, and will continue to criticize Chavez' dictatorial actions. He said the offer of U.S. financial support for Church social projects is important since the GOV has removed most GOV funding for such activities. Castillo cautioned that the Vatican would remain "prudent" in its approach toward the GOV, but urged the U.S. to reach out to Cardinal McCarrick in Washington. He added that Cardinal Maida of Detroit and Cardinal George of Chicago are also friends of the Venezuelan Church.

¶5. (C) Archbishop Porras also welcomed possible U.S. financial assistance for Catholic social projects. Small projects designed to show the Church's presence among the people and to highlight alternatives to the GOV's socio-political model are key. He would send several proposals to the Ambassador for consideration. Porras also asked if the U.S. might assist the Church's efforts to set up a Catholic satellite television channel. Despite the support of Gustavo Cisneros, DirecTV has so far rebuffed the Church's request that it broadcast the channel.

¶6. (C) Porras said he would be in Washington on September 7-8 to meet with the U.S. Bishops Conference and to attend a dinner in honor of outgoing Inter-American Development Bank

President Enrique Iglesias. He would remain for two or three additional days in Washington to meet with Cardinal McCarrick and would be open to meeting with U.S. officials.

17. (C) Father Biord agreed that the Church's duty to denounce Chavez' dictatorial government would provoke further clashes with the GOV. The Church would need to focus its social and doctrinal training to highlight the flaws of the communist model. Chavez would continue trying to "to buy" some priests in an attempt to undermine the position of the Church hierarchy, and would intensify his attacks on the Catholic Church hierarchy. He said the Church would need international help to resist this pressure.

18. (C) Porras and Castillo volunteered to help the Ambassador obtain a meeting with the Papal Nuncio in Caracas. They attributed the Nuncio's failure to meet with the Ambassador to the fact that the GOV had made the Nuncio wait several months before finally allowing him to present his credentials on July 11. The GOV had only accepted his credentials after the Vatican had given Venezuela's new Ambassador to the Vatican the same treatment.

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Comment:  
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19. (C) The extent of the Catholic Church's political influence remains unclear, but opinion polls regularly show it to be Venezuela's most respected institution. Castillo's constant criticism of Chavez- as shown by Chavez' vitriolic attack on the octogenarian Cardinal- has clearly touched a GOV sore point. We will continue to reach out to Catholic Church officials to support their efforts to promote democratic freedoms and social justice.

Brownfield

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